

JOHN BRINSMEAD OF WEARE GIFFARD: 1814 - 1908

Peter Coad

*“Let the piano’s martial blast
Rouse the Echoes of the Past”*

John Brinsmead was born in Weare Giffard on 31st October 1814. His mother, Elizabeth, was the daughter of John and Elizabeth Beer. John was a blacksmith. Elizabeth married Henry Brinsmead in 1803 and they had eleven children including John, the subject of this biography. Henry was an innkeeper and victualler as well as a farmer and lime burner. The family lived at Quay Cottage, the last cottage on the west end of Weare Quay.

While still very young, John borrowed one of his father’s carts to fetch coal from Torrington to retail to the villagers. He also built up a business importing limestone from Cauldy Island, near Tenby on the Welsh coast, to Bideford. To increase his capital John invested in a flock of sheep which he grazed free of charge on the ‘adjoining downs’. Unfortunately, his sheep were stolen. When twelve years old John left school and for twelve months learnt farming on an adjoining farm. During that period he was put in charge of a herd of cattle on Exmoor as well as other isolated parts. John’s desire to become a farmer waned and he craved to become a craftsman. He was apprenticed to a cabinet maker in Torrington where he was to spend the next six years. John worked a thirteen-hour day taking a delight in this work and soon mastered his trade. He was

possessed of great energy and thought nothing of a thirty-six mile walk to Exeter.

John’s elder brother, Henry, had already established himself as a piano maker in London and John resolved to join him. He is said to have walked to London from Weare Giffard carrying his cabinet maker’s tools in a basket on his back although other biographies claim that he went by steamer. He soon established himself as a journeyman pianoforte case maker. Though a novice, within a year, at the age of twenty-one, he was earning twice as much money as the most experienced men in the factory and was able to save thirty shillings a week. Though not a total abstainer, John had no expensive habits, enjoyed good health and was a glutton for work.

Having become a master craftsman, his brother Henry made him a partner. John undertook the responsibility of making the cases and sounding boards. However, the partnership ended with a quarrel; John departed saying, “I’ve got my health and strength and I won’t give in until I can make a piano better than any other living man.” A few weeks later, in 1836, John Brinsmead started business in Windmill Street, Tottenham Court Road, London with a

Once the business was well established, John married Susan Brown, daughter of an officer from the 92nd Highlanders. They went on honeymoon by coach to Dover and then to Canterbury; their marriage was a very happy one and they produced five children.

The firm became John Brinsmead and Sons when his sons, Thomas and Edgar, joined the firm. From small beginnings sprang a firm which was to become world famous.

John and Susan celebrated their 70th wedding anniversary in 1907; among a deluge of international congratulations came one from King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra. By that time John Brinsmead & Sons had sold over 80,000 pianofortes and was well known and respected worldwide.

His awards included:

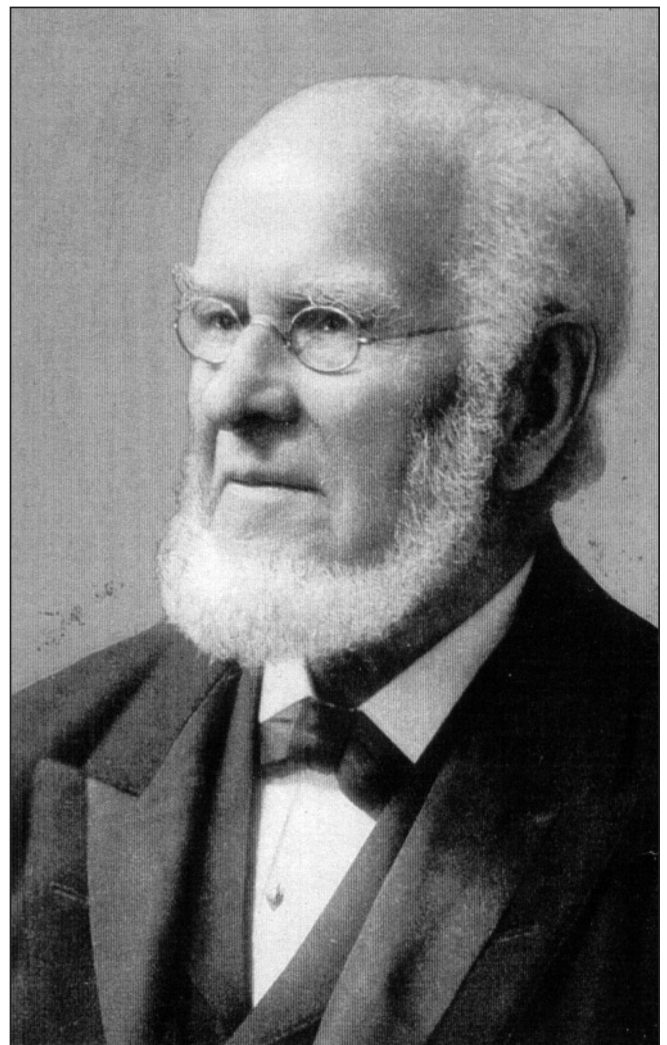
Cross of the Legion of Honour; Knight of the Order of Portugal; Diploma of Honour and Gold Medal, South Africa, 1877; Grand Medal of Honour and Diploma of Merit, Philadelphia, 1876; Diploma of Honour, Paris 1874 and Honorary Membership of the National Academy of France; The Gold Medal, Paris, 1869; Diploma of Extraordinary Merit, Netherlands International Exhibition, 1869, etc.

When John died in 1908, he left a fortune of £46,000.

* *Extracts from 'Fortunes Made in Business: Life Struggles of Successful People' published by Harmsworth Bros. 1901, and other research.*

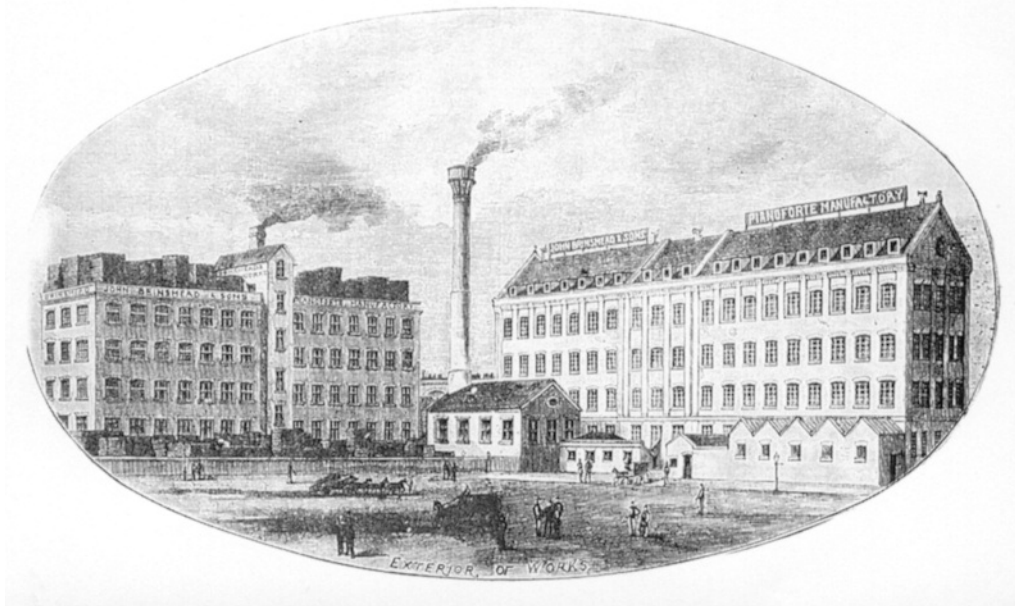
FOOTNOTE.

When researching my Beer family 'tree' I was surprised to discover that I shared ancestors with the famous pianoforte manufacturers, John Brinsmead & Sons. I was even more surprised to learn that at the 1880 Sydney International Exhibition, Madame Cecilia Summerhayes, the most famous Australian concert pianist of the era, demonstrated Brinsmead grand pianos. It is indeed a small world; Madame Cecilia was a distant cousin of my wife, Prudence.



John Brinsmead

The Brinsmead Factory 1883.



Prize Medal, London, 1862; Medaille d'Honneur, Paris, 1867; Diplome de Mention Extraordinaire Amsterdam, 1869.

JOHN BRINSMEAD & SONS,
Pianoforte Manufacturers,
18, WIGMORE STREET, LONDON, W.
Steam Power Works—1 to 4, Chenies Street, Tottenham Court Road; 8, Little Torrington Street; and 6, Hertford Place.

Trichord, 7 Octaves,
with Iron Tubular Compensating Supports.

Guineas.

Rosewood 38

With Patent "Perfect Check Repeater Action" (1868) 44

Walnut 40

With Patent Action 48

Trichord, 7 Octaves,
with Iron Tubular Compensating Supports.

Guineas

Rosewood 45

With Patent Action (1868) 53

Walnut 48

With Patent Action (1868) 56

Dimensions:
4 ft. 2½ in. high by
4 ft. 6 in. wide.

*. * Illustrated Price Lists and full Particulars of the "Perfect Check Repeater Action" (Patented 1868) sent upon application.

Highest Award, Paris Exhibition, 1878.

JOHN BRINSMEAD & SONS'
Patent Sostenente Pianos.

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THE HIGHEST AWARD.

The CROSS of the LEGION of HONOUR,
The GOLD MEDAL, and also the SILVER MEDAL.

HAVE BEEN ACCORDED TO

JOHN BRINSMEAD & SONS,

FOR THE SUPERIORITY OF THEIR PIANOS EXHIBITED AT THE PARIS INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION OF 1878.

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"There is but one class of Gold Medals for the Exhibition, and the DECORATION OF THE CROSS OF THE LEGION OF HONOUR CONSTITUTES A SUPERIOR RECOMPENSE."

Extract from the Special Report, signed by M. A. FERIS, the official reporter of the Musical Jurors.

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John Brinsmead and Sons Patent Sostenente Pianos.

The Principal of the previous Honours gained by the Brinsmead Pianos are:—

The Diploma of Honour and Gold Medal, South Africa, 1877. The Grand Medal of Honour and Diploma of Merit, Philadelphia, 1876. The Diploma of Honour, Paris, 1874, and the Honorary Membership of the National Academy of France. The Gold Medal, Paris, 1869. The Diploma of Extraordinary Merit, Netherlands International Exhibition, 1868. The Medal of Honour, Paris, 1867. The Prize Medal 1862, &c.

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Sole Agents for New South Wales,
W. H. PALING & T. B. HOGG,
Sydney.